

NANCY SPERO

The Black Paris Paintings 1959 –1966

by Elaine A. King

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SCENES FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN, 1962

THE BLACK PARIS PAINTINGS

There is nothing easy about Nancy Spero's art. During the past twenty years, her work has changed drastically both in style and content. Since 1966, when she stopped painting on canvas, her work has become highly political. It is characterized today by being direct, not flashy, and belonging to no movement. To the mainstream art system, Nancy Spero has always been an outsider. Continuously her work has possessed a genuine, personal quality, stemming from her inner concerns and not fashionable art trends. She has been a figurative artist during her long career, and since her student days, her figures have possessed an enigmatic quality. Throughout her work, there exists a primal element which manifested itself early on in her art. This is revealed in her leaning toward mythology; Spero definitely reveals an affinity for the art of classical antiquity.

Numerous other influences have contributed to the shaping of her idiosyncratic expression. While a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago between 1945 and 1949, Spero was exposed to many sources which affected her artistic development. She was a student at the onset of the New York School of Painting in the forties. She watched New York become the world's new capital of culture after the demise of Paris in 1945. The New Bauhaus at the Institute of Design (Illinois Institute of Technology) reshaped this country's concepts of design and architecture in the forties and fifties while Spero was living in Chicago.

Spero's teacher Paul Wiegardt, an immigrant from Germany via France, made her very aware of Fauvist-expressionist imagery. Spero said she gained a tremendous understanding of Matisse and his execution of the figure from Wiegardt. Spero admired the paintings of Degas; "I felt in his compositions there exists simultaneously a sense of control and freedom." Leonardo da Vinci was another great source of inspiration for Spero; "His handling of the figure is so powerful and magnificent." However, the artist Spero claims she was "crazy about"

was Jean Dubuffet. This is not surprising because Dubuffet worked independently of the Abstract Expressionists and in a largely intuitive manner which appealed to Spero's penchant for working intuitively. His love for the element of accident lent itself to his technique of incising figures into a ground made up of sand, earth, pigment and other mysterious elements. Through the 1950s Dubuffet used a predominantly monochromatic palette of dull ochres and blacks. His technique, coupled with his divine madness, appealed to Nancy Spero. In Paris she was inspired by his imagery; this comes through in these Black Paintings, both in technical inventiveness and the dark palette.

Perhaps the greatest source of inspiration for Spero, which continues to play a vital role in her work today, came from the art of primitive and ancient cultures. While a student at the School of the Art Institute, Spero would spend much time looking at artifacts at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. "I was most impressed with these objects from primitive and ancient cultures. I was fascinated with the frontality of these works and the power they had on the viewer." She was inspired by the objects from New Guinea, New Hebrides and the totems from Alaska. "I liked the idea that these objects were used as a part of a worship or magic ritual." Spero felt that these objects were more real because "they were integrated into the culture and not merely objects for commodity . . . I loved primitive art for this very reason. When you look at those objects you begin to realize that there is some powerful force behind them. They possess so much of the earth and energy of the people who used them. One got a sense of how they were made and used."

In 1959 Spero and Leon Golub made a decision to move to Paris for their "artistic survival." They needed to "bypass New York" because Abstract Expressionism and formalist abstraction had a strangle hold on the art world at this time. The galleries, the museums, the collectors would not consider anything else as relevant. "I felt Paris was still an open place, allowing me the freedom to create in an individual way. I needed to get away from

the all-consuming pressures of the art system of New York." In Paris she did not find a large support group. Nevertheless there was a sense of tolerance for multiple expressions, unlike New York of the sixties. In the ten years after the end of World War II various forms of free geometric abstraction dominated the painting of Europe, but Dubuffet and Giacometti gave fantastic figuration a new impetus. Also, the school of Paris was enriched at this time by the continuing activity of old masters and the return from the United States of Leger, Ernst, Masson, Picabia and others. Also Duchamp, who after 1945 commuted between Paris and New York, brought new life into the city.

"I was able to show my work in different galleries in Paris and people were receptive to what I was doing. I had my first one-woman exhibition at the Galerie Breteau in 1962 and continued to exhibit there until 1968." In 1964 she returned to the United States and felt it was necessary to move to New York even though Minimalism was running rampant and Pop Art became the replacement for Abstract Expressionism. "It was a difficult time and no one would give me the time of day. I had to continue to pursue my art in isolation and with very little encouragement."

Today Spero is heralded as a "political" artist and a maker of coarse, visionary, feminist imagery. Given the rejection Spero has experienced, it is not surprising that she became a politically active artist. For a long time Spero's art was unfashionable, meaning unsaleable, in an art world which for decades had been dominated by Greenbergian formalism. It was not until New Figuration and Neo-Expressionism became the dominant art of the eighties that channels began opening up for this maverick artist, who for decades has tenaciously pursued her unique style as a veteran figure painter.

Lucy Lippard said: "She emerges at this particular moment as both the vivid contemporary of the shouting, spitting, shitting, Neo-Expressionism now in vogue. With one difference — Spero cares. Her mythical imagery is rooted in decades of political activism as well as in an aesthetic far fresher and

more disturbing than that of her reactionary peers."¹

Prior to April 1983 very few people knew of or had seen Nancy Spero's Black Paris Paintings. They had their official debut in New York at the A.I.R. Gallery (Artists in Residence, the first women's cooperative art gallery in New York City, of which Spero was a founding member in 1971 and remains an active member of today). This show was part of a three-gallery retrospective of Spero's work from the past thirty years. It was at this exhibition at A.I.R. where I first came in contact with the Black Paris Paintings and was immediately impressed by their powerful uniqueness and sensuousness. It was at the opening of this exhibition when I invited Nancy Spero to exhibit her Black Paris Paintings in the Hewlett Gallery and I offered to produce a catalogue.

Her political scrolls and new works were getting deserved exposure and recognition but these early paintings were literally unknown. It was evident that in this body of work the very foundation of Nancy Spero's eccentric art existed. This work had been neglected unfairly for too long, and it needed to get more public exposure. Although these paintings represent a very small percentage of Spero's creative output, they are extremely powerful and special. The overall mood of the compositions evoke an intense romantic feeling. It is in the Black Paintings that Spero lets go of conscious deliberateness and painted with her spiritual, not bodily, eye. A synthesis between abstraction and realism is achieved. Her inventive use of color, line and atmosphere enhance the humanness of the figures and works to release the private world of feelings of her imaginary couples.

The Black Paris Paintings presented in this exhibition are not only an anomaly to the period in which they were painted but also to Spero's greater body of work. When young artists were seeking alternatives to Abstract Expressionism, Spero rejected the "cool art" of the 1960s which became the alternative answer for that decade. Her Paris Paintings reveal that yet another serious artist was committed to content-based art and to exploring the figure in the sixties.

The Black Paris Paintings were created between

1958 and 1966. "I titled these paintings the Black Paris Paintings because I made most of them in Paris between 1959 and 1964. Only one was painted in Chicago and several were completed in New York between 1965 and 1966."

One can perhaps say that the Paris Paintings represent early incarnations of Spero's feminist/mythological imagery but it is important to note that they were never intended to be political statements. "These paintings are about timeless subjects which continually appear in our society. They dealt with lovers, great mothers, children and prostitutes; women have been an important part of myth and women continue to be important subjects in art. I have always felt this, since I was a student looking at the artifacts at the Field Museum." In retrospect, one might perhaps consider the Black Paris Paintings as representing a type of "Blue Period" in Spero's development; it was her time of private introspection and reflection.

A strong existential sensibility prevails in the Black Paintings. Spero was fascinated with existentialism. All of these paintings were painted at night and "these are paintings of the night revealing things that happen in the night. The darkness envelops the figures and gives them a sense of protection. These works were meant to be about isolation. The figures are related yet they are not. We are ultimately alone and isolated. I wanted to make an existential statement about the self. Look at the paintings of the lovers. Even though they appear to be together they are ultimately alone." A sense of separateness is particularly evident in her *Lovers* painted between 1962 and 1965.

These Black Paintings comprise approximately 30 canvases. Many of them took months to complete. Often Spero would begin working with bright colors but, because of laborious reworking, the resulting images would evolve into dark surfaces in which only hints of underlying color can be sensed. "I would repaint the damn things for months at a time trying to reach the primary essence. . . ."

One senses in these private works nuances pointing toward the mythological imagery which has come to



LOVERS, 1962–65
Lent by Susan Rothenberg, New York

characterize Spero's art. In the mysterious, dark, fog-like environments imbued with underlying striations of color, we find erotic rituals being enacted between enigmatic couples; however, sex here appears to be reduced to the primitive struggle between Eros and Thanatos. Spero appears to be saying in these paintings that erotic desire and its satisfaction is the key to the origin of the world. Love in this work is an expression of duality in which the antagonistic elements of the male and female forces, the Chinese Yang-Yin, are united momentarily. "I deliberately treated each composition with delicacy, in order to emphasize the sense of relaxation and other-worldliness that lovers experience." Spero seems to be reducing lovemaking to its most primitive state, where exuberance, tenderness and spiritual communication is exchanged between two beings. She depicts sexual energy, potency and undefinable emotions in an ethereal way.

In the fifties Spero spent time in Italy and became fascinated by the erotic wall murals in Naples. She points out that these frescos were a primary source of inspiration for the Black Paris Paintings. In Spero's work one can sense the influence of this ancient art. The subjects of Pompeian wall paintings were frequently inspired by mythology and some of the erotic scenes were presented in rather subdued colors. The erotic wall paintings, particularly from the mature phase of the Third Style (14–62 A.D.), are subdued and rendered in a rather dull-red tonality called 'Pompeian Red.' The natural colors available at the time were derived from plants and minerals, ranging from red, yellow ochre tones to black and blue. Perhaps what Spero refers to as "trying to reach the primary essence" was her recreation of the essence of these powerfully, beautiful erotic works from antiquity.

In *Scenes from the Mediterranean*, figures exist in vast, undefinable environments. Bare outlines of figures are encompassed by empty space. Their genders are often unclear or of little significance. The sparsity of these seemingly theatrical scenes could evoke a moment in a Beckett play, where alienation is contemplated and celebrated. Although

Spero's painterly execution and focus differ greatly from Picasso's, the *Mediterranean* paintings appear to possess a sensibility found in the pictures of this master's romantic Rose Period.

Spero's broken color in the image, unifying the figures with the free abstract background and her delicate interplay of limbs suggest an intellectual and spiritual communion found in the expressionist idiom of Oskar Kokoschka. In addition, the tension of the jagged, swirling lines against the rapture exuded from the faces in many of Spero's *Lovers*, calls to mind Kokoschka's romantic sensibility created by his flickering, saturated brush strokes. The freedom of Spero's contour lines often takes her figures to the point of caricature. Volume is reduced to linear essence where often the sublimated figurative forms fuse into the spaces they occupy.

In 1964, when Spero moved to New York, she experienced culture shock. The prevailing Minimalist aesthetic was oppressive. As our military involvement in Vietnam increased, Spero became more politically conscious. "I became dissatisfied. There was no audience for the Black Paintings and I began thinking: 'What am I doing? Am I going to be doing these for the rest of my life?' It was time to stop repeating myself and to move on and become active in the real world."

At the time, she began painting "black angels — nightmare figures swooping down with screaming head and almost wormlike or birdlike shapes."² In 1966 Spero stopped painting on canvas altogether and began making her paper collage paintings. "It was just like a kind of rebellion . . . in that medium I couldn't express what I needed to articulate. Painting was too conventional, too establishment, too limiting, too much like wall paper. I wanted something freer, more temporal, ephemeral. I needed to get away from that damn studio. By now I figured out the relationship between sex and power and I was angry. I now turned to making shocking art."

Shortly after, Spero began making her War Series in which she poured out her rage. For almost twenty years Nancy Spero has been waging her war against

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injustice and inequality. Gone is the innocence of the Black Paris Paintings. Although primitivistic qualities continue to characterize her work, her art has never been the same since 1966. The angrier Spero got, the more tenuous and vaporous grew her imagery.

Spero's 1984 monoprints are mythic depicting women protagonists set in motion, revealing they are no longer passive victims. Does this suggest that Nancy Spero will begin another series with another thrust? I wonder if Nancy Spero might consider painting on canvas again. It would be curious to see what she might create after her complex evolution over the past twenty years.

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¹*The Village Voice*, April 19, 1983, Lucy R. Lippard, "Nancy Spero's 30 Years War", p. 1.

²*Ibid.*

All the quotes from Nancy Spero came from an interview with the artist in New York on December 13, 1984.

LIST OF WORKS

*SCENES FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN***

Oil on canvas, 16 x 16¾, 1962

*SCENES FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN***

Oil on canvas, 10½ x 18½, 1962

*SCENES FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN***

Oil on canvas, 13 x 18, 1962

*SCENES FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN***

Oil on canvas, 13 x 18, 1962

*LES 4 SAISONS***

Oil on canvas, 18½ x 24, 1962

*GENETRIX***

Oil on canvas, 68 x 43¾, 1962

*LOVERS**

Oil on canvas, 64 x 80¾, 1962–65

LOVERS

Oil on canvas, 42¾ x 80½, 1962–65

Lent by Susan Rothenberg

*LOVERS**

Oil on canvas, 51¾ x 80¾, 1964

*LOVERS**

Oil on canvas, 33¾ x 81, 1964

PARIS

Oil on canvas, 55¾ x 80, 1962–65

Lent by Morris & Harriette Jaffe, New York

PARIS

Oil on canvas, 39 x 76¾, 1964

Courtesy of the Willard Gallery, New York

*THREE FIGURES**

Oil on canvas, 45½ x 96, 1966

*Courtesy of the Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

**Lent by Nancy Spero

All sizes stated in inches; height preceding width.